



Let's Face the Mu

W. Sibley Towner

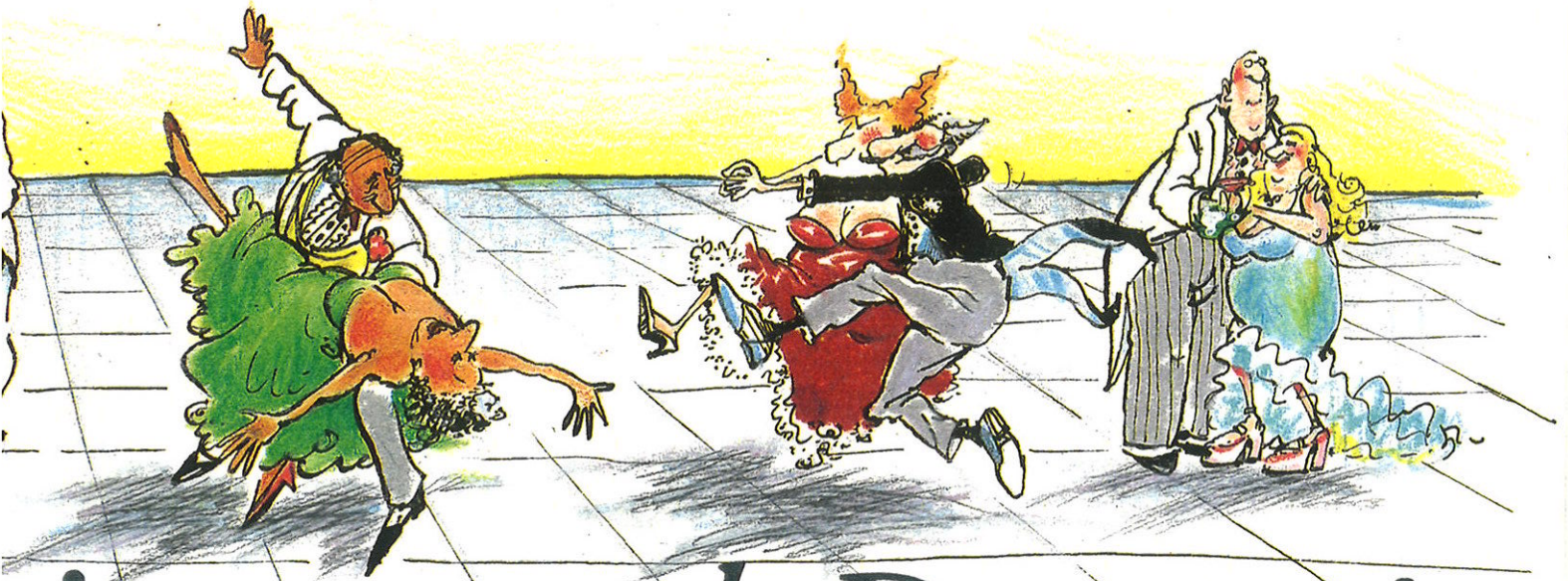
Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8

My mother-in-law came from Davenport, Iowa, to celebrate her 93rd birthday with us on the Fourth of July. Her two daughters, one granddaughter and I were there, and we recalled old times, ate corn on the cob and even fired off an honorific firework or two. Amid these scenes of domestic bliss, my mother-in-law told a joke, as she is fond of doing: "A mother came up to a man and said, 'Are you the man who saved my child from drowning?' He was a shy person, not given to public exposure; he didn't want a lot of praise. He scraped his foot in the sand, hung his head and said, 'Well, yes ma'am, I am the man.' She said, 'Well, where's his cap?'"

When she told this, all at once I saw my mother-in-law as a young Iowa farm girl with twinkling eyes and a merry smile who could tell jokes and ride her horse, Florence Pepper, over to see her boyfriend, Fred, who in time became her husband and my wife's father. She did a lot of living in her day: not fancy living, mind you, not daring living, but real living. She plucked a lot of chickens, did a lot of garden work, went to a lot of meetings of

the Epworth League in the grove below Selma, Iowa, sang a lot of songs there. She gathered into her soul a joy of living that still stands her in good stead.

It's not the same now, of course. She has experienced many losses. Even she can hardly imagine ever having ridden Florence Pepper. She doesn't wear a jaunty hat anymore and the man who was once her boyfriend and husband is now 26 years in his grave. But she still has the



Music—and Dance!

Mary Chambers

twinkle in her eye. Therefore, to my mind she is a living example of someone who heeded the advice that the Teacher gave his pupil in the lyrical last verses of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

I have two points to make in this sermon, and they come in the opposite order of the text. In chapter 12, the Teacher in effect tells his youthful pupil and us, "Have no illusions about old age." By the device of allegory, the text describes the decline of the body through references to things out there in the environment. "The sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened"—that is to say, vision fails. "The guards of the house tremble"—the legs are beginning to totter. "The women who grind cease working"—those are the teeth rotting and breaking. "When the doors on the street are shut" means deafness comes; "the sound of grinding is low"—indigestion; "one rises up at the song of a bird"—insomnia. There are references to almond trees blossoming—that is, white hair—and the grasshopper dragging itself along. The Talmud thought that this phrase meant the decline of sexual vitality and the failure of desire.

In verse 6 the Teacher invokes a different metaphor, the failure of a well. This involves a silver cord, a golden bowl, a pitcher, a fountain and a well. Without precious,

nurturing water no life is possible: the dust of the body returns to the earth and the breath returns to God who gave it.

Point one, then, is this: Let there be no illusions about old age. It is not to be avoided. It cannot be painted over. Sustecal won't cure it. It cannot be escaped, except by premature death. No one here this morning is surprised at the teaching; we know it is painful to get old.

Now, what was the Teacher's point in going into all of this? Was he despondent at his own decline? Was he morbid? Was he just offering a text from which Towner could preach a downer? I don't think so. He strips away illusions about old age in order to make the case set forth in 11:7-10: Do it now. This second point of mine is his first one: Live while you're alive. Ecclesiastes 11:9 should be translated as follows: "Rejoice, young per-

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son, while you are young and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, *and* [not *but*] know that for all these things, God will hold you to account."

Do you hear that incredible statement? This text is saying that God positively expects you to follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes and will hold you responsible if you don't. Enjoyment of life is an imperative, and it has to begin now. Here, the judgment of God is an evaluation of whether or not a life has been lived fully, not a condemnation of the love of life.

It is perfectly sound Christian doctrine to say that God wills that we love life and live it exuberantly. That we might have life and have it more abundantly is why Jesus came into our midst. When the Teacher says, "Banish anxiety from your mind and put away pain from your body," *his* motivation is the brevity of life. When Jesus says the same thing, he offers an entirely different motive: "And can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Matt. 6:27-29).

Jesus' motivation to live a life of gratitude, fullness and joy is driven not by a melancholy sense of the fleetingness of all things, but by a sense of the nearness and opportunity of the kingdom of heaven. Of course, with an Ecclesiastes-like realism, Jesus acknowledges that "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. 6:34). That cautionary note aside, however, he urges his followers to get on with the business of earth-keeping, peacemaking, loving and abundant living.

He wants us to do so appropriately and responsibly, of course: to respect our boundaries and the dignity of others, and to avoid being silly and self-serving or deluding ourselves about true happiness. But he wants us to live! The fact that we can expect to do just that for at least 30 years longer than the original readers of the Bible did is a cause for rejoicing. What a pity if misplaced piety or fear should lead people to throttle back

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their enthusiasms and joys in favor of stiff propriety! What a pity if those extra 30 become a tedious, unhappy bore!

The time of life that the Teacher describes in chapter 12 we call dotage. Its hallmarks are decline in quality of life and eventually a postpersonal existence, the vegetative state. The knowledge that frail old age and death lie ahead for all of us can serve as a useful prod, just as the Teacher meant it to be. By teaching us that one day the light will fade, the daughters of song will no longer be audible and the life force will fail, he enables us all the more to enjoy the light of the moon and the stars now, to appreciate the sound of the birds and the taste of tacos now, and to savor intimacy and love now.

But the Teacher does not push us only to quiet enjoyment and enrichment. He also summons us to action. While we have the chance, we have work to do—the work of conceiving and raising children, of building monuments and writing poems and sermons, of organizing civic improvements and serving on boards, of playing piano duets and creating artwork in silver and glass—now, before "the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel is broken at the cistern . . ." We can keep on doing this work even in our old age. Living abundantly is possible even when our bodies are letting us down.

In my Bible classes at the seminary I often ask students to bring a "life-text"—something from the newspaper or the world of rock music or elsewhere in our pop culture—to place alongside the biblical text under consideration. This helps identify the tender spot in our experience that the biblical text comes to heal. I have a life-text for us today, a verse from a song by Irving Berlin. It's a sappy love song, to be sure, and it would sound even sappier if I sang it, so I'll just say a verse. I suspect that the Teacher would agree with its sentiment. Maybe Jesus would, too:

Before the fiddlers have fled,
before they ask us to pay the bill,
and while we still have a chance,
let's face the music and dance!

Perhaps you will agree that those who dance while they can hear the fiddler play, who ride Florence Pepper across the fields to see their friends, and who live as fully as they can when all their faculties are present, are precisely the people who, even in old age, still have a twinkle in their eye and life to share in their hearts. ■